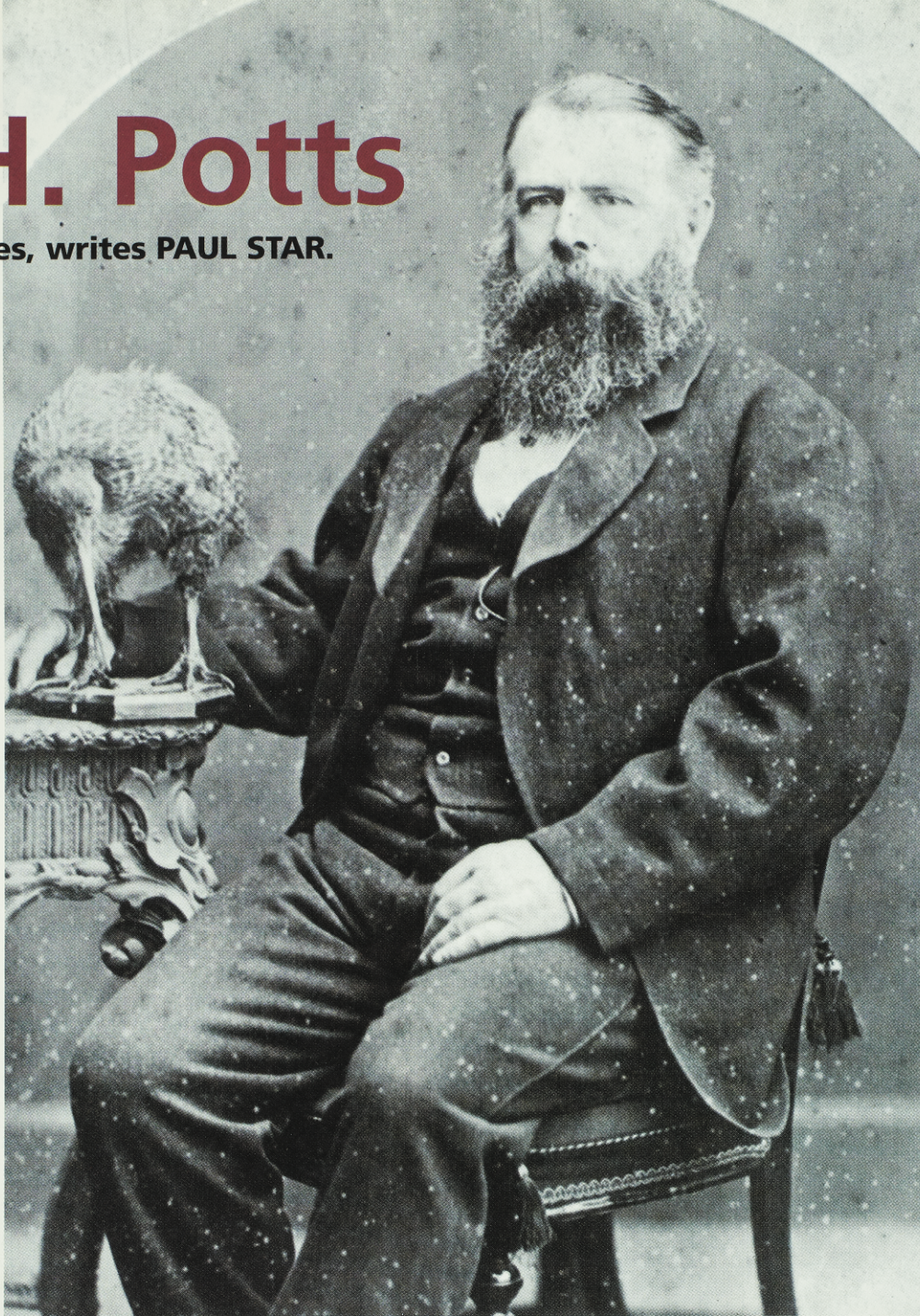


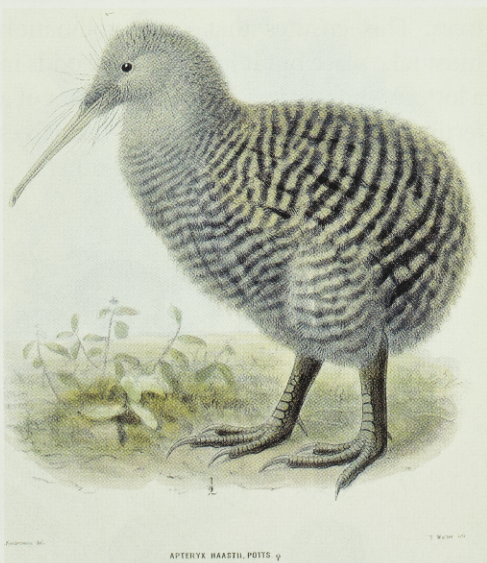
# H. Potts

times, writes PAUL STAR.



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Thomas (T.H.) Potts (1824-88): run-holder, Parliamentarian, nature writer and pioneer conservationist. Like many of his contemporaries, Potts was active in nurturing introduced species such as gorse, oak and pines but believed in protecting native forests and birds.



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thought 'people themselves can alone determine what shall be allowed to exist'.

In the nineteenth century, the role of Christians as stewards of the earth more often became a mandate for colonization than for conservation, but the Anglican tradition of 'natural theology' caused Potts to treat all nature with reverence. The value of native species was unknown — since they had only recently been identified — but it was not to be denied.

Potts also understood 'nature's economy' and saw the need to conserve habitat as much as species. Victorians didn't have the knowledge of ecology which has made us so aware of the flow-on effects of environmental change, but some had a sense of the web of life.

In the late 1870s, fresh ideas on scenic beauty, tourism and health coincided with worries about timber shortages and climate change. Americans wrote of national parks, and Yellowstone became the world's first in 1872. Potts welded his old arguments for reserves to the new talk of health resorts and national parks, and

conceived a plan for 'national domains'.

He identified three kinds of preservation — of health, of trees, and of birds — and proposed three kinds of 'domain'. Some would be sanitariums for the human sick. Others would be native forest reserves, 'nurseries and storehouses ... of the indigenous flora of New Zealand'. Thirdly, and most radically, Potts suggested fauna reserves to protect interesting species for science.

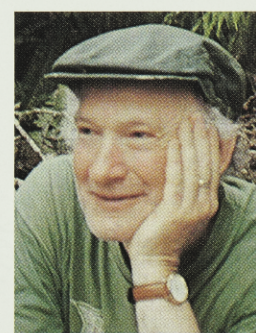
He wanted islands as fauna reserves. Resolution Island, plus some offshore islands in the north, could be parks or domains 'where animals should not be molested under any pretence whatsoever'. In Europe, hunters had fenced in game reserves for centuries. In a new country, Potts turned to the natural barrier presented by the sea.

**T**hese ideas had their impact. Scientists successfully lobbied for Resolution Island to be reserved in 1891. Richard Henry's time there, from 1894 to 1908, represents one of the most dramatic attempts at bird preservation in any country's history. Henry transferred kakapo from the mainland to Resolution Island to protect them from stoats and rats. Unfortunately, the attempt eventually failed when stoats swam to the island, but it was a world first in 'ecological restoration' with government support.

The broader notion of national parks or domains was also accepted about this time. In 1883, the Bishop of Nelson hoped for 'Government lands ... which might be our Yellowstone domain'. In the year before Potts's death, Horonuku, on behalf of the Tuwharetoa, donated land which became (in 1894) the core of Tongariro National Park.

National parks have since become the dominant model of environmental protection. Because of that, the history of conservation is often traced back only as far as their creation. But while European settlement before that undoubtedly involved sweeping destruction, this never went on unquestioned or 'without reserve'.

The life of New Zealand's 'first conservationist' includes many examples of concern for the environment, even in this period of its most rapid transformation. Born out of paradox it may be, but evidence of this early concern is undeniable and inspiring.



PAUL STAR is an environmental historian and secretary of Dunedin Forest and Bird. His research into T. H. Potts was assisted by the New Zealand History Research Trust Fund.